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Book Review

P – Szulc, Tad
P – Sterling, Claire
2 The Masaryk Case

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The Masaryk Case

By Claire Sterling. Illustrated. 366 pp. New York: Harper & Row. $7.95.

By TAD SZULC

At dawn of March 10, 1948, Czechoslovakia's immensely popular Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, a democratic idealist, fell to his death from the bathroom window of his apartment at the Czernin Palace in Prague.

The son of Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, who founded the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, Jan Masaryk had reluctantly agreed to remain Foreign Minister in the Communist regime that captured power in Czechoslovakia in a smooth and bloodless coup d'état three weeks before his death. But his demise in extraordinarily mysterious circumstances gave immediate rise to grave suspicions of murder by Soviet agents or their local acolytes — although the Communist authorities rendered the verdict of suicide and closed the case within the incredibly short period of eight hours after the presumed time of Masaryk's fatal fall. There followed a succession of increasingly contradictory allegations, often outright lies and mystifications, as well as a series of unexplained deaths and suicides by numerous persons connected with the brief investigation.

All these suspicions and doubts surrounding Masaryk's death remained bottled up in Czechoslovakia during the long night of the Stalinist Communist rule. But Masaryk was not forgotten by his compatriots or by diligent investigators abroad. In December, 1951, for example, this newspaper's columnist C. L. Sulzberger produced a key document offering significant circumstantial evidence that, indeed, there may have been foul play involved and, subsequently, others kept the doubts alive.

It was a tribute to the Masaryk legend—by then the memory of both Masaryk father and son had grown to the proportions of a national myth in Czechoslovakia—that the advent of the liberal Communist experiment in Prague under Alexander Dubcek led straight to the official reopening of the case. While Czechs undertook pilgrimages to the cemetery at the village of Lany where Thomas and Jan Masaryk lie buried side by side, the newly liberated press began demanding a new investigation into the circumstances of the Foreign Minister's death two decades earlier.

These demands carried heavy hints that operatives of the Soviet M.G.B. (now K.G.B.) secret-police — the "Beria gorillas" so named after the late Soviet secret-police boss Lavrenti Beria—and Czech S.T.B. murdered Masaryk. The exploding sentiment of public veneration for the old President whom Communist propaganda had denigrated for 20 years as a bourgeois enemy, and the parallel hunger for the truth about Jan's death rapidly became a focus of the anti-Soviet feeling that was sweeping Czechoslovakia in the exhilarating days of the "Prague Spring."

On April 5, 1968, therefore, the Dubcek regime formally ordered State Prosecutor Jiri Kotlar to undertake a new investigation into the events of the night of March 9-10, 1948, during which unknown persons had turned Masaryk's bachelor apartment at the Foreign Ministry into a shambles in what may have been a desperate struggle preceding his defenestration. Most Czechs were too skeptical by nature to accept the official 1948 explanation that Masaryk, allegedly distraught by supposed criticism in the West of his participation in the new Communist Cabinet, had committed suicide by jumping backwards from the small and hard-to-unlock bathroom window while the wide window in his bedroom remained invitingly open. Other details provided in 1948 were equally unconvincing, if not downright improbable and absurd, to the Czechs.

What, if anything, of value Kotlar uncovered during his investigation is not clear. The Soviet-led armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia on Aug. 21, 1968, and it is unlikely that Kotlar would have pursued under the Soviet occupation any leads pointing to the hypothesis that Soviet agents had, in fact, murdered Masaryk or ordered his assassination. The investigation continued nevertheless after the invasion, but in a manner so bizarre as to suggest that Kotlar and his superiors were searching not for a solution but for a graceful way out of the whole affair, if not for a new whitewash.

But—fortunately, for historians—Kotlar was not alone in seeking the truth about Jan Masaryk. To his evident displeasure, his own trail was being followed and cross-checked by a stubborn and dogged American newspaperwoman named Claire Sterling, the Rome correspondent for Harper's Magazine, who made up her mind early in 1968 to reconstruct the Masaryk case.

Asking questions around Prague about Jan Masaryk was not a simple, or even safe, undertaking in the spring of 1968, let alone after the invasion. But Mrs. Sterling, ignoring advice to "forget" the case and continuously led astray by those who lied to her, or improperly remembered the 1948 happenings or simply embroidered upon them, pursued her private investigation in a way bordering on obsession. She uncovered dozens of sources, including long-forgotten former policemen, Masaryk's former aides and servants and their relatives as well as members of the Masaryk family, and, after the invasion, she virtually smuggled herself back into Czechoslovakia to resume her hunt. One of my own most vivid recollections of Prague in 1968 where I then served as The New York Times correspondent, is the sight of Claire Sterling returning to the hotel from her secret rendezvous and interviews, sometimes excited, sometimes crestfallen.

The result of this whole effort is Mrs. Sterling's book, "The Masaryk Case," in which she flatly concludes that, "I believe Jan Masaryk was murdered," although "it wasn't a perfect crime." Having sifted and compared evidence, unearthed what she believes to be new clues, caught the hapless State Prosecutor Kotlar in demonstrable lies and checked her findings with leading British and Italian forensic medicine specialists, Mrs. Sterling argues fairly convincingly that Soviet or Czech Stalinists had crudely murdered Jan Masaryk, probably to block his defection to the West.

Her reconstruction of the alleged crime is not perfect—the account of the last two hours or so before Masaryk plunged out of the window is inevitably based on deduction and intelligent guesswork—but Mrs. Sterling is right in saying that "We know of at least twenty-five Czechs with some information about Masaryk's death who went to prison afterward, of whom ten were executed, one died in prison, one died of physical

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